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Soviet said to deploy long-range missiles

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Washington—Despite official public denials, administration specialists said yesterday the Soviet Union is deploying mobile long-range missiles that violate the constraints of the informally observed SALT II treaty.

If the current semi-public debate spreads, it is certain to give a new political cast to the East-West and internal U.S. arguments about arms control. American participants, while differing about U.S. arms requirements, have agreed generally that the Soviet Union keeps its agreements.

But deployment of the Soviet SS-16 missile would be a clear violation of the SALT II treaty, the strategic arms limitation treaty signed in 1979 by Presidents Carter and Leonid I. Brezhnev, but not ratified by the U.S. Senate.

There is, in fact, sharp internal debate in Washington about the nature of Soviet activity concerning the SS-16. Intelligence agencies reportedly agree that the evidence of a deployment is inconclusive. But one informed official said the Soviets plainly have "been doing some testing" and that it was quite possible for political analysts to view the activity as amounting to deployment.

The SS-16, a mobile missile, is an intermediate with an extra rocket rocket stage added to make it long range.

SALT II, drafted to control both the quantity and quality of strategic weapons, was signed in Vienna to the apparent relief of both superpowers. But it encountered skepticism in the U.S. Senate, was opposed by then-candidate Ronald Reagan, and was never ratified.

Nonetheless the Soviet Union and the United States agreed informally to observe its terms while they sought a new agreement. Only last week Mr.

Reagan forecast new negotiations, renamed START—for strategic arms reduction talks—by summer.

Questions arose about the SS-16 yesterday after columnists Roland Evans and Robert Novak reported a "new, still-secret consensus among U.S. intelligence agencies," reached after months of argument, that the Soviets have deployed 200 SS-16s near a test range called Plesetsk.

Asked about the report at his daily briefing, State Department spokesman Dean Fischer replied that "our intelligence information does not support these statements."

But within hours other officials, indignant at the denial, reaffirmed the main points in the report. The columnists were wrong about the number of SS-16s, they said—explaining that the figure is less than 200—but declared that there is no doubt about Soviet deployment.

If the issue continues to develop, it appears certain to become part of a growing debate. Mr. Reagan may have had it in mind when he asserted last week that the Soviet Union has achieved a "definite margin of superiority" in strategic weapons.

Previously U.S. officials have argued only that the American strategic deterrent is becoming vulnerable to a Soviet preemptive attack. For the administration and its predecessor, that assumed vulnerability has provided the justification for a buildup of U.S. strategic forces.

But popular and congressional sentiment for a freeze of weaponry at current levels has been growing. The administration has replied that the Soviets, as experience indicates, will not negotiate seriously unless convinced that the United States means to match their power.

Mr. Reagan plans to negotiate—presumably beginning this summer—while building U.S. forces. U.S. officials recently have emphasized the importance of foolproof means to verify compliance in the next treaty, a point that confirmed deployment of the SS-16 would underscore.

The SS-20, the 3,000-mile weapon that can be converted into the 6,000-mile SS-16, already is the subject of negotiations.

President Reagan has offered to forgo the deployment of offsetting weapons in Europe if the Soviet Union will dismantle the 300-mile SS-